



Patrice Gaines

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As I sat waiting to hear the judge's words, my eyes fell on my own small, trembling brown hands and I realized where my real power lay. Even as a child, I had felt powerless. But as I was looking at these white men, it struck me that I had always given away my power -- to my parents, to teachers, to men I loved.

— Laughing in the Dark

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1950
- * African-American journalist and memoirist
- * Her first memoir is *Laughing in the Dark*

Biography

Patrice Gaines was born in 1950 on a military base located in Quantico, Virginia. She was the oldest child in a family of seven. As a young girl, her first five years of life were spent on a military base and this is where she thought she was sheltered from the harsh realities of racism; however, ironically, it is also where she endured her first encounter with the sting of racial hatred from a white first-grade teacher named Mrs. Bloomfield. Gaines often remembers that no matter how cute, clean, or smart she was, Mrs. Bloomfield never validated her intelligence nor her enthusiasm to learn, and that is when she realized that skin color made a difference in America. At the age of ten, after living on the base for five years, Gaines's family moved from Quantico, Virginia to Beaufort, South Carolina, where she had her first black teacher. She recalls that in Beaufort, "the static was gone, because I was no longer different, no longer the only colored one, but one among many. I could relax" (29).

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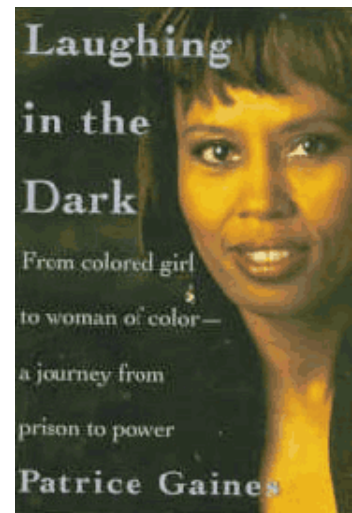


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Biography continued

Gaines has published two books. *Laughing in the Dark: From colored girl to woman of color, a journey from prison to power* (Doubleday 1995) is Gaines's personal memoir of her journey from being a colored girl with no power to a woman of color. Through numerous painful experiences with men, she learns the lesson of self-empowerment. This memoir also details her struggles with abusive men, drug addiction, and her search for wholeness as a woman.

Her most recent book entitled *Moments of Grace: Meeting the Challenge*, on the other hand, is a spiritual book that talks about the steps she took to change her life. It is a reflective and introspective account of her past, and it is also a recognition of her present accomplishments. She believes that this book will help anyone who is willing to take steps to activate change in his or her life.



Gaines received journalism training from the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, named after the late Robert Maynard, owner and publisher of the Oakland Tribune in California. Her first professional journalist job was with the *Miami News*. She also participated in numerous writing workshops and briefly enrolled in a community college, where she took a lot of writing courses. By immersing herself in writing, she discovered "writing was saving my life as much now as it had when I was younger, writing bad poems to survive the pain" (233). She thinks of writing as a way to heal by purging pain.

Gaines was a journalist for 23 years and has published many feature articles for *The Washington Post* where she recently retired as a reporter. However, when Gaines was hired as a reporter, she had to convince *The Washington Post* editors to overlook her prison record for heroin possession. When she was younger, her boyfriend convinced her to carry drugs for him at a Steppenwolf Concert because she did not look like she did drugs (102). Out of her need to be loved, she carried the drugs and was apprehended and sentenced to prison for less than a summer, and received five years probation. As she recalls in her memoir, becoming a heroin addict was just another of her feeble attempts to be loved by a man who really did not love her.



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Biography continued

After more than 10 years writing for *The Post*, Gaines had carved a niche for herself by writing stories that reflected current issues. She discovered that many of the troubled lives she wrote about were a mirror of herself from the past. She wanted to write about real-life issues that affected women and the underrepresented in society, because she felt that was where she could make a greater impact. She often identified with “those young sisters” she witnessed on her newspaper beat who live the life she once had (Lordly and Dame 1).

In addition to her work for *The Post*, Gaines has written for *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines. The National Association of Black Journalists awarded her the Salute to Excellence Award for her piece on “Tough Boys and Trouble -- Those Girls Waiting Outside D.C. Jail Remind Me of Myself.” Moreover, this year the Volunteers of America awarded her the Empatheia Award for outstanding community service and excellence in reporting on social issues.

In addition to her illustrious career as a reporter, Gaines is a board member at Joseph’s House, a home for men with AIDS, and the Theatre for the Mentally and Physically Disabled. Additionally, she is a motivational speaker at juvenile detention centers, schools, literacy programs, drug rehabilitation centers, and domestic abuse centers.

The settings for *Laughing in the Dark* are the northern and southern regions of the East coast. During her early childhood, she moved around frequently to live with different relatives. These frequent shifts in residences caused her to become unstable in her personal relationships later in her life. She also learns that the man she has called “father” all her life is not her biological father; this emotionally distant relationship evolves into a disconnection with other men in her life. At the same time, she feels the insatiable desire to be loved, but chooses men who turn out to be abusive. Thus in her quest to be loved she is unable to distinguish between real love and abuse, which causes her journey to womanhood to be even more difficult.



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Biography continued

Some of the major themes emerging from the autobiographical account of this remarkably strong black woman's life are empowerment, a quest for self-love, self-esteem, and wholeness as a woman. It is through her gift as a writer that she finds her "voice" -- a voice that is powerful, compassionate, and resonates with hope. By sharing her darkest experiences with the reader in *Laughing in the Dark*, she takes the belief a little further that we as women are permitted to heal, save, and empower ourselves. Reading about Gaines's actual and painful experiences as a black woman in America evokes in the reader an empathy for not only black women, but for women of all ethnicities seeking to take control of their lives.

Later in the memoir, Gaines befriends gay male reporters who offer her unconditional love and acceptance as a woman and a professional, thus signifying her need to bond with men who view her as a complete woman capable of fulfilling her dreams and desires as a writer, mother, confidant, and friend.

Throughout the book, Gaines's diction is clear, vivid, raw, and engaging. To evoke her journey to victory, she uses similes such as "we dismantled our booth on the last day, I felt like Cinderella. The clock had struck midnight and I had to step off the pages of *Ebony* and return to my wretched life." This simile speaks of the disparity between the life she yearned for and the life she once led.

Gaines's life story is empowering for all women, and it is through her honest and in-depth revelations that women can relate to her personal and universal struggles with the complexities of womanhood. Her ability to define herself as a black woman shows her determination to break free from societal and cultural limitations, as well as from the pain of psychological and physical abuse



Patrice Gaines

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Moments of Grace (1998).

Laughing in the Dark (1995).